STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies. This document may not be released for open publication until it has been cleared by the appropriate military service or government agency.

AVERTING THE TRAIN WRECK OF CAPTAIN ATTRITION – A LEADERSHIP SOLUTION

BY

COLONEL THOMAS W. WEAFER
United States Army

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:
Approved for Public Release.
Distribution is Unlimited.

USAWC CLASS OF 2001

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PA 17013-5050

20010622 060

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

AVERTING THE TRAIN WRECK OF CAPTAIN ATTRITION – A LEADERSHIP SOLUTION

by

Colonel Thomas W. Weafer
United States Army

Commander Robert O. Kedney
Project Advisor

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:
Approved for public release.
Distribution is unlimited.

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: COL Thomas W. Weafer

TITLE: Averting the Train Wreck of Captain Attrition – A Leadership Solution

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 10 April 2001 PAGES: 30 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

A whole host of factors have come together in the past few years to cause young Army officers to question the attractiveness of military service. The cultural effects of the drawdown, doing more with less, political correctness, eroding benefits, and a booming economy are but some of the causes of rising dissatisfaction with military life. Many of the factors contributing to officer attrition are out of the control of the Army. However, there are internal measures the Army can take to help reduce unsustainably high officer loss rates. This paper looks at officer attrition in the context of a leadership challenge – it examines current perceived problems in leadership culture and command climate and recommends several changes focused on improving morale and retention of young officers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT III

AVERTING THE TRAIN WRECK OF CAPTAIN ATTRITION – A LEADERSHIP SOLUTION 1

- THE PROBLEM 3
- THE X FACTOR 7
- HOW DO WE FIX IT? 10
- ITS ALL ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND TRUST 16

ENDNOTES 19

BIBLIOGRAPHY 23

AVERTING THE TRAIN WRECK OF CAPTAIN ATTRITION – A LEADERSHIP SOLUTION

On 19 April 2000, the Washington Post included the following headline on its front page: "*Younger Officers Quit Army At Fast Clip; Study Finds Little Trust In Senior Leadership.*"

> Dissatisfied younger Army officers are leaving the Army in droves, worrying the service's top leadership and provoking intense debates about the problem at military bases across the nation. To understand why so many captains, in particular, are bailing out after five to 10 years in the military, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Erik K. Shinseki recently commissioned a survey of 760 Army officers studying at the service's mid-career Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. The resulting reports, which have not been made public, are startling in their denunciations of the Army's current leadership. "Top down loyalty doesn't exist," says a summary of the officer's comments. "Senior leaders will throw subordinates under a bus in a heartbeat to protect or advance their own careers."[1]

The results of the study referred to in the Post's article were leaked from Fort Leavenworth and rocketed rapidly around the Army by e-mail. Dripping with cynicism, the comments in the study were shocking to senior Army officers. Reactions varied from "Quit your complaining...its always been that way," to "How many more times does this message need to be said before someone takes it seriously and does something about it?"[2] Many officers believed that the study results were an overdue wake-up call for the Army leadership concerning the causes for a mounting problem in junior officer attrition. In 1989, before the beginning of the drawdown, captain attrition in the Army averaged 6.7 percent each year. When the drawdown ended in 1996 and Army end strength reached steady state, attrition remained in the historical range. However, captains began to leave the Army at an increased rate in 1997 and by 1999 they were leaving at a rate of 10.6 percent each year -- an increase of 58 percent over the pre-drawdown number.[3]

Perhaps even more troubling are the career intentions of those company grade officers that are currently on active duty. The Army Research Institute (ARI) has been conducting a career intent survey using the same survey questions since 1987. Since 1991, there has been a steady downtrend, from 52 percent to 35 percent, of those officers planning to make the Army a career. Similarly, just since 1995 there has been a "steady and significant increase (from 22% to 36%) in the percentage of company grade officers reporting that they will leave at the end of their current obligation." Much of the change in the survey responses came in the last year of the survey (1999), when seven percent more said they were leaving and seven percent less indicated they were staying for a career. Unfortunately for the Army, the career intent survey has proved to be an accurate predictor of actual attrition. Studies have shown that the survey has a correlation of between .72 and .90 in relating intention to leave and actual separation from the Army.[4]

In a 19 October 2000 briefing at the Army's Commanders Conference of two star generals, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER), LTG Timothy Maude, acknowledged that "officer attrition is continuing at a rate that will not allow full manning of the force structure if loss rates continue...."[5] The captain attrition problem has clearly got the attention of the Army leadership, but the leadership is not yet sure how to attack the problem. A number of studies which will help to point the way have been already been completed or are currently underway.

The U.S. Army War College "Well Being Study" has already generated decisions by Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki which will improve quality of life by fencing time off on weekends and making all federal holiday weekends four days long. Other studies, which have focused directly on the problem, have taken different tacks. DSCPER's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis study, entitled "Where Have all the Captains Gone?," highlights quality of life disparities in pay, housing, and spouse employment opportunities between active duty captains and their civilian counterparts.[6] ARI has published a number of germane reports based on their annual Sample Survey of Military Personnel. ARI has concluded that the following items are critical to an officer when making a decision to remain in the Army for a career or to depart to the civilian sector:

Job Satisfaction
Time for Personal/Family Life
Integrity/Professionalism
Overall Quality of Life/ Spouse Satisfaction
Pay and Compensation

Unfortunately, it will be difficult for the Army to quickly change many of the factors that seem to be influencing young officers to leave the Army. Substantial improvements in pay, housing, and healthcare will require congressional action that is unlikely to occur in time to make a near-term difference. Existing overseas commitments will likely cause PERSTEMPO to remain high for the foreseeable future. The Army leadership is beginning to realize that it has limited options to quickly act to stop unsustainable junior officer loss rates. Pronouncements from the DCSPER that seek to placate young officers by promising to be more accommodating in making assignments have great potential to simply engender more cynicism.[7] In an Army already grossly short of captains, Captain Career Course graduates are still going to have to go to Korea and other undesirable places in large numbers -- and the captains know it.

What the Army leadership needs to do is focus on a problem that it can credibly affect -- the crisis evidenced by the stinging comments of the majors at Fort Leavenworth. Perhaps the most serious problem the Army is facing is one of leadership -- the poisonous effects of careerism and "zero-defects" have crept into the Army and have resulted in a generation of career-oriented senior leaders that have, to some degree, lost the trust of their subordinates. This paper will explore current problems in the command climate and leadership culture of the Army and will recommend changes focused on improving morale and retention of young officers.

THE PROBLEM

The primary cause of the current leadership malaise in the Army Officer Corps was the post-Gulf War drawdown of the Army. The size of the officer corps was trimmed by about a third from 1991-1996 while the number of Army divisions was cut by 44%. Though most officers would agree that the Army leadership did an outstanding job of planning and executing what were perceived to be fairly distributed personnel cuts, the drawdown spawned a “cloud of pessimism” and had a major impact on officer morale.[8] Opportunities for success were sharply diminished as the number of career enhancing jobs available was reduced by a greater amount than the number of officers in each year group who remained to compete for them. As uncertainty and anxiety over the future increased, officers became more self-concerned and personal survival became more important relative to selflessness.[9] Downsizing placed an institutional emphasis on elimination vice training and retention.[10] Commitment to the Army decreased and officers more often began to concern themselves with preparing “fallback positions” in the civilian sector.[11]

Jockeying for the smaller number of key “muddy boots” jobs that are key to promotion and advancement also lead to a rise in careerism in the officer corps -- a ticket-punching mentality developed where officers were more likely to place their own ambitions ahead of the goals and needs of the Army. While some officers were clearly more ambitious than others, during the drawdown officers were generally forced to become more careerist as a matter of survival.[12] Increasing careerism resulted in less cooperation within the officer corps and increasing involvement of senior officers in the assignment process. More desperate to obtain key assignments, officers began to focus up the chain of command as they sought to gain favor from bosses that might weigh in for them on their next assignment. Senior officers condoned this behavior during the drawdown in the name of "taking care of their people," but the practice has become institutionalized and is a major contributor to careerism in the officer corps.

An insidious side-effect of the trend toward careerism is the "zero-defects mentality." The zero-defects mentality describes an unforgiving professional situation in which nervous commanders, always trying to look good, demand perfection from their subordinates.[13] In a 1996 article in Military Review, then Chief of Staff of the Army, General Dennis J. Reimer stated categorically that, "The Army is a zero defects organization," and that there had been "a return to the "zero defects" and ticket-punching mentality of the 1960s and 1970s that had nearly destroyed the officer corps."[14] General Reimer went on to say that the state of ethical conduct had become "abysmal" and that "few battalion commanders can afford integrity in a zero defects environment" where "telling the truth ends careers quicker than making stupid mistakes or getting caught doing something wrong."[15] These are pretty strong words from a service chief – unfortunately, they did not make much of an impact as they resulted in no policy changes.

It is not hard to understand how the zero-defects mentality evolved. During the drawdown, the Army was looking for any reason to non-select officers for promotion. Officers, especially those in key positions, perceived that their performance had to be as "perfect" as possible if they were to survive. The net effect is that many officers are now more committed to their own promotion and job security than to the organization itself – and they are afraid to show initiative or take risk for fear of making a career ending honest mistake.[16] Comments in the Fort Leavenworth study highlight this problem:

> "Zero defects is real...its here to stay. No tolerance for mistakes. One reason for this mentality is extremely junior battalion commanders...who have been promoted below the zone, have limited experience, and are intent that nothing will "derail their train." No freedom to take chances/fail/learn from mistakes."[17]

A 1999 study by the Army Research Institute noted that the zero-defect mentality is adversely affecting both leader development and the morale of the officer corps for several reasons. In an Army that will become increasingly reliant on initiative for expeditionary operations in the future, the study noted that the zero-defects mentality affects leader development by breeding risk-averse behavior on the job.[18] In such an environment, innovation and risk taking are stifled and fear of failure becomes more important than trying something new that might improve the organization. Subordinate leaders do only what they are told and are afraid to show any initiative.[19] Mission accomplishment in zero-defects organizations is more focused on short-term crisis management rather than the long-term health of the unit – over time, the organization's health erodes, and its ability to accomplish the mission deteriorates.[20]

The ARI study noted that the zero-defects mentality also "fosters reluctance to truthfully report unit status."[21] Leaders who routinely "shoot the messenger" create an environment that erodes the ethical climate and may tempt one to either cover up or "color" bad news in order to protect themselves.[22] If the Army is truly a "values-based organization," then this erosion of ethical behavior is particularly troubling. Leaders who quibble on reports set a poor example for their subordinates and diminish the level of trust between leader and led. The comments from the majors at Fort Leavenworth clearly indicate that trust has been a casualty of the zero-defects mentality. One of the major summary points of the survey notes that "poor command climates" and a "stronger than ever" zero-defects mentality are much of the reason for "deteriorating trust in senior leadership."[23]

Another effect of the zero-defects mentality is that it reinforces the belief that Army units should maintain the same high standards even though they are resourced at a lower level.[24]. In an organization that places a high value on mission accomplishment, a "can-do" attitude is a prized hallmark of successful leadership. However, when leaders continue to accept missions that stretch their units beyond what their subordinates believe are reasonable limits, trust may again become a casualty. When commanders find themselves in conflict between the values of loyalty to authority and the values of loyal dissent and candor in support of their organization, such conflict must be openly resolved if trust is to be preserved.[25] Unfortunately, resolution of such conflict is difficult in a zero-defects environment, and top-down loyalty to subordinates usually loses out to mission accomplishment.

The ARI study also found that a zero-defects climate encourages micromanagement by leaders who are unwilling to risk the possibility that one of their subordinates might make a mistake.[26] Micromanagement occurs when untrusting leaders, attempting to achieve perfection, involve themselves in great detail in the activities of their subordinates.[27] Commanders resort to micromanagement to ensure that they continue to "look good" in a resource constrained environment. As one colonel put it:

> The point is that in a variety of areas we are expecting the attainment of levels of training and discipline which we no longer resource. Extraordinary commanders sometimes achieve these standards without corrupting the organization – most do not...[28]

The combined effects of careerism and resource constraints in a zero-defects environment have resulted in an Army-wide culture of micromanagement. Both the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army and the PERSCOM Commander have recently sent messages to the field that decry micromanagement and its effect on captain retention. General Keane said it like this:

> ...We increasingly hear from these captains that they are frustrated by what they perceive as a "zero defect" mentality and a resulting culture of micro-management. They came into the Army to lead soldiers and to willingly shoulder the immense responsibility that goes with command; however, they tell us that this responsibility has been taken away from them by leaders more concerned that nothing goes wrong on their watch.[29]

Comments in Army surveys strongly support the view that captains are chafing under the micromanagement of their bosses. An ARI study of captains at Fort Benning found that dissatisfaction with job and Army life was one of the main reasons pushing young officers out of the Army. Of all reasons given for leaving the Army, 65% were related to job/career dissatisfaction. Among the main factors in causing such dissatisfaction were "excessive micromanagement" and poor leadership.[30] The recently completed Chief of Staff of the Army appointed blue ribbon panels on Army Training and Leader Development confirm this discontent in the officer corps. Of all captains surveyed, 72% agreed with the statement: "I see no possibility for continued job satisfaction in the Army." Again, micromanagement, and its associated lack of trust and confidence in subordinates, was singled out as one of the prime reasons cited for officer job dissatisfaction.[31]

Automation has played a significant supporting role in the development of the micromanagement culture. Young officers are clearly unhappy with the way their bosses are using technology to replace traditional leadership and management practices. Computers make it easier to centralize supervision of activity in an organization and to enforce a zero-defects climate. E-mail provides the opportunity to quickly task members of the organization without due thought to the time and resources required to complete the task. Leadership by e-mail also takes the personal touch out of command. There is less face-to-face contact with leaders, less personal explanation of the "whys" of each requirement, and a risk of social alienation between the leader and the members of the organization.[32]

A key feature of Army culture that ARI says may also be contributing to the sustainment of the zero-defect mentality is the newest edition of the Officer Efficiency Report (OER). The revised OER, now in use for three years, limits the number of "top-blocks" a senior rater may give to 50% of all the officers he or she has cumulatively rated. In effect, the senior rater portion of the OER places an officer either in the top half or bottom half of all the officers of the same grade that the senior rater has ever rated. The Army initially provided guidance to senior raters that asked them to limit their "top-blocks" to 30% off all officers rated. However, there was no "stick" to enforce this guideline, and the amount of top-blocks given quickly moved toward the 50% range.

Despite PERSCOM pronouncements that "center of mass" (two-block) ratings were perfectly acceptable and would not damage an officer's competitiveness, the officer corps quickly divined that this was not the case. Promotion board results clearly indicated that top-block ratings were essential in key "branch qualifying" jobs, such as command, if one were to remain competitive for promotion and career advancement. As a result, the OER engendered increased competition between officers of the same grade for prized one-block ratings. Such competition fosters risk-averse behavior, micromanagement of subordinates, and all the other negatives associated with an officer who is overly concerned about "looking good" in front of the boss. Such behaviors clearly sustain the continued existence of the zero-defects mentality.[33]

THE X FACTOR

Further complicating the relationships between today's senior and junior officers are the attitudinal differences between the "Baby Boomers" and the younger members of "Generation X." Raised in a nurturing environment and well educated by their parents, the Boomers entered the workforce in the less friendly economy of the late 1960s and 1970s. Raised to expect a steadily increasing standard of living, Boomers had to fight hard to get a job, and once they got a job, they worked like slaves to achieve their dreams. The prosperity of the 1980's finally brought to the Boomers the financial reward they had been seeking, giving rise to the "greed ethos" of that decade and reinforcing their penchant for thrusting themselves into their work.[34] The feminist movement brought Boomer women into the workforce in large numbers starting in the 1980s. This trend allowed both Boomer parents to tirelessly pursue work-related goals, often at the expense of marriage and family.[35] Divorce rates soared and the number of children in single-parent homes rose to over 40%.[36]

Born between 1963 and 1983, "Xers" clearly have different values than their Baby Boomer parents.[37] Baby Boomers are characterized by their "Gen Xer" subordinates as self-righteous workaholics who are too political, take their work too seriously, and who "do a great job of talking the talk," but "don't walk the walk."[38] On the other hand, when one examines the environment that the Xers grew up in, its not hard to understand why they are stereotyped by their Baby Boomer bosses as disloyal, irreverent, short on attention, arrogant, lacking commitment to work, and overly concerned with their own personal fulfillment.[39] While Boomers generally enjoyed a secure childhood in the traditional nuclear family, Xer childhoods were fraught with uncertainty.

> Many were latchkey kids, who from a very young age were responsible for themselves after school. Many grew up in single households. Raised on video games, TV, MTV, and computers, they learned to digest information coming at them rapidly from many sources. Having witnessed corporate downsizing, the demise of lifetime employment, and the price of neglecting family in favor of work, many in this new generation have declared "Not me!" They reflect a shift, conscious or not, from unyielding loyalty and commitment toward the organization to loyalty to oneself.[40]

In a very intriguing study, "Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps," Leonard Wong of the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, looks for causes of captain attrition by examining the "generation gap" between the Boomers and the Xers. Wong concludes that today's generation of captains think and act differently than captains of the past and senior leaders need to understand these differences if they are to be successful at stemming the increasing tide of officer attrition. He derives several observations about Xer captains by conducting an empirical analysis of data collected by ARI from captains in 1988 and again in 1998. Wong notes the following differences between "Captain Boomer" and Captain Xer:"

- Xer captains are more confident in their abilities. They are more self-reliant and believe they will flourish wherever they are planted;
- Xer officers view loyalty to the organization differently. They are still loyal, but their loyalty is based on the bond of trust between themselves and the Army -- not on the promise of lifelong employment;
- Generation X captains expect more balance between work and their personal life – unlike Boomers, the Xers are less willing to place their families in a background position to support their career;
- Pay is more important to Xer officers than it is to Boomers, but pay is not the reason that the Xers are leaving the service;
- Xer captains are simply not impressed by rank – its not that they are disrespectful, but their life experiences have taught them to be skeptical of authority, and they are clearly more critical of senior officers than were captains in the past.[41]

Wong's research on Xers also uncovers a huge positive – that they are just as proud to be Army officers as were their Boomer predecessors, and that they value the sense of camaraderie and community in the Army even more than the Boomers did.[42]

Other research on Generation X contains some germane observations. One author notes that the Xers are "the first generation to reject organizational loyalty outright" -- they instead offer loyalty through a sense of "mutuality" or partnership.[43] They are willing to work as hard as anyone as long as, once the mission is defined, they have:

> *the space, resources and the freedom to produce the desired results.* This is not a demand to "do it my way or I'll hit the highway." Rather, Xers, are focused on how to learn and succeed. Perhaps this is why Xers prefer ongoing feedback rather than occasional formal reviews. As a logical extension of their other preferences, most Xers do not tolerate micromanagement…(this) is absolutely critical to remember if you want to keep your talented Xers.[44]

The need for constant feedback and the avoidance of micromanagement are recurring themes concerning the needs of Xers. Because they are focused on learning and achieving, feedback is important to Xers -- without it, they cannot improve. One author claims that timely and specific feedback on a regular basis "*is the most important short-term reward managers can provide to Xers.*"[45] Without feedback, Xers lose confidence, grow anxious about their work, and, without confirmation that their investment in the organization is paying off, begin to look elsewhere for employment. Significantly, formal performance reviews are less useful to Xers. They view them as too infrequent, not specific enough, and often either too negative or too positive to be of much use. More regular and specific feedback, given in an informal manner with a clear purpose and outcome, is more suited to Xer needs.[46]

Micromanagement is the bane of an Xers existence. Because Xers are already skeptical about developing loyalty to an organization, managers who devalue Xers by oversupervising them simply reinforce that skepticism and cause Xers to withhold both loyalty and their best work.[47] Given their need to build self-capital, Xers are extremely frustrated in environments where is there is little room to learn, innovate, and independently produce quality work that receives recognition.[48] Giving Xers responsibility for a task and then granting them the resources and space to execute it is the best way to take advantage of their "natural predisposition to be innovative and entrepreneurial."[49]

Reviewing the findings of the surveys and studies conducted on captain attrition finds them replete with examples of Xer frustration with the current senior leadership of the Army.

> "Zero defect culture does not reward risk-takers = Little challenge or opportunity to display unique competencies = Low job satisfaction/failure of expectations."

> "Lack of empowerment for captains/company commanders. Too many decisions taken out of their hands. Closely connected to perceived inability to take risks and fail..."
>
> "...we are still a zero-defects army...many officers are so worried about their careers that they still back stab...this is what many did to get to get through the drawdown. It is now ingrained in these officers."[50]

The zero-defects mentality and the associated leadership maladies that it spawns would cause the Army problems in any time period, as it most recently did in the 1960's and 1970's. However, there are some dynamics at work in the current situation that do not bode well for the Army if it fails to soon correct the course of its leadership climate. The combination of low officer accessions in the early 1990s, Xer captain frustration with senior officers wedded to the zero-defect mentality, and a booming economy that gives these captains other options, means the Army is headed for a retention "train wreck" if it does not take immediate action.

HOW DO WE FIX IT?

As an Army, we generally know what we need to do to restore a proper leadership climate. In its survey on officer leader development, ARI listed the following leader behaviors among those that officers believe are most effective in developing leaders:

- Coaching and Mentoring
- Empowering junior officers with the authority to make decisions
- Being tolerant of mistakes
- Giving constructive feedback
- Leading by example[51]

Development of young leaders is arguably the most important legacy that senior officers leave to the Army. Proper leader development is critical to mission accomplishment and to the future ability of young officers to contribute to their profession – and it also has a significant impact on the desire of our young officers to remain in the military and make it a career.[52]

So how do we escape the current cultural acceptance of the zero-defects mentality and all the negatives that go with it? How do we get our senior leaders to re-establish the critical bond of trust that our young officers perceive has been damaged, if not broken? It is easy to say that these challenges can be solved by more enlightened leadership by our brigade and battalion commanders. Indeed, these senior leaders will be the ones to effect any change to take place, but it is unrealistic to expect these officers to begin granting their subordinates room to make mistakes unless they have top cover from above. The point is that any change in this arena will have to be top-down driven – an officer corps that is already risk-averse is unlikely to fix this problem on its own.

As mentioned earlier, GEN Reimer sounded the zero-defects alarm bell in 1996 but nothing happened. There was no impact because there were no tangible incentives to cause the culture to change -- we have long known that "buck up" speeches have only a short-term, if any, effect. What is necessary to effect cultural change is to begin rewarding the type of behavior that the Army desires to obtain. Somehow we need to create an environment where leaders are more tolerant of mistakes, are not afraid to empower their subordinates, are more willing to fulfill their role as mentors, and are encouraged to lead by example. Similarly, we must make it clear that the type of leadership characterized by self-serving careerism and the zero-defect mentality is not welcome in the U.S. Army.

In its report, American Military Culture in the Twenty-first Century, CSIS notes that "selection and promotion systems are the power levers for cultural change."[53] As another researcher wrote:

> Officers are not born sycophants, idiots or liars; they are men of normal intelligence and morals who quickly figure out where the carrots and sticks of the Army's personnel system lie and adjust behavior accordingly.[54]

Although overly cynical, the truth of this statement can hardly be questioned. All one has to do is look at the angst the new OER (DA Form 67-9) generated in the field as officers scrambled to figure out how to "game" the system.

In Department of the Army level messages to the field, much has been made of the great regard that recent selection boards have for the new OER. One Chief of Staff message noted that: "Selection boards clearly indicate that the OER is giving them what they need to sort through a very high quality officer population and select those with the greatest potential."[55] Yet OERs are important not only for the function they serve on boards, but also for the behavior they engender in the officer corps. The same message from the Chief of Staff indicates that officers continue to be concerned about "center-of-mass" ratings and that commanders are not conducting mandatory counseling of their subordinates.[56]

Officer concern over "center-of-mass" reports is clearly contributing to risk aversion in the Army. By allowing senior raters to place 50% of all rated officers in the top block, the OER system has basically made an officer either a winner (top block) or a loser (two block or "center-of-mass") on each report he or she receives – there is no middle ground. In a sense, there is such a dichotomy in the senior rater portion that it is an all or nothing vote by the senior rater, and officers receiving two-block reports, especially when serving in key branch qualifying jobs, perceive little hope for the future.

This problem could be easily rectified by lowering the maximum percentage of ratings a senior rater can put in the top block to the 25-35% range. If 70% of all officers were in the second block, then that block could truly be the "center-of-mass," and officers who received such a rating would not view it as a "loser" rating, but simply as an average one. This would keep hope alive for officers who receive two-block ratings and lessen the unhealthy competition that currently exist for one blocks. This change to the OER is a relatively simple fix that should be made immediately. The field clearly has little faith in the current OER, and the evaluation system is damaging the culture by not only reinforcing the zero defects mentality but also by fraying the bond of trust between the officer corps and the institution.

It is not surprising that General Shinseki's message also highlights the fact that "officers continue to say they are not being counseled." Commanders who are self-serving and focused on short-term results have little time to coach and mentor their subordinates, for mentoring is "a leadership obligation rarely rewarded when done well."[57] Even though our Xer captains crave feedback and despite the fact that we have added all kinds of mandatory counseling to the OER system, counseling is still not happening. It is unlikely that exhortations from the Chief of Staff "to slow things down and reenergize the formal and informal counseling of our officers" will have much impact on improving the mentoring of our young leaders.[58] We need to change the culture to make mentoring a leadership obligation that *is rewarded* when done well.

If the current OER is the "stick" of the promotion and selection system, then perhaps we need tweak the officer evaluation process or add other "sticks" to our arsenal in order to engender the type of cultural changes necessary to produce healthy leadership climates. Current promotion boards look at OERs that may or may not reflect an officer's true leadership ability. In fact, they are just as likely to be a reflection of each officer's ability to keep his boss happy by accomplishing the short-term goals listed on the OER support form – sometimes at a cost to the long-term health of the organization.

Both good and bad leaders can get good results -- one by inspiring his subordinates to do well and the other by use of intimidation and fear. But at the end of the day, both may be successful in the rater's and senior rater's eyes. In fact, the bad leader may be perceived to be more successful, because this leader is the one who will not hesitate to proclaim his success or even lie about it. This phenomenon manifests itself in two ways: first, impressionable young officers may think negative leadership is acceptable and thus perpetuate this poor style of leadership. Second, more mature young officers may decide that they want no part of an organization that rewards tyrannical leadership with promotion and command.[59] Perhaps what is needed is a mechanism to more accurately measure both an officer's ability to accomplish the mission *and his competency as a leader.*

As former Chief of Staff of the Army, General Edward C. Meyer once observed: "You can fool your superiors, but you can not fool your peers or your troops."[60] In an organization that treats leadership almost like religion, it is interesting that the people that truly know a leader's worth have no input into either the leadership development or the evaluation processes. In its study on military culture, CSIS concluded that current evaluation systems "are not up to the task of consistently identifying and advancing highly competent leaders."[61] The CSIS report went on to recommend that:

> Promotion boards should be provided supplemental data more relevant to leader competency than the standard performance reports rendered exclusively by an individual's senior officers. To enhance the reliability of the selection process, for example, peer and subordinate input collected in a manner not to compromise the chain of command could be provided as behavioral feedback to junior officers for their development and provided as additional information to boards that are selecting mid- and senior-grade officers for promotion.[62]

The CSIS recommendations also called for the development of organizational climate surveys that would become part of the unit readiness reporting system. Such surveys would indicate to senior leaders which units "reward competence, set clear priorities, allow free flow of information, inspire trust, support learning, and stimulate innovation and versatility."[63]

Implementation of such recommendations would certainly be quite controversial in the Army. Officers who already practice positive leadership would probably welcome the changes as a relatively non-threatening way to improve both themselves and the Army. On the other hand, those senior leaders who would be most threatened by peer and subordinate input are the ones who model the behavior that we are trying to eliminate. Negative leaders would no doubt be bitterly opposed to incorporating any type of peer or subordinate input into the evaluation process.

Nonetheless, the Army should press ahead with some modification of the evaluation process that incorporates a well-formulated mix of peer/ subordinate input. Data could be collected and filtered by an agency outside the chain of command to ensure that the process does not evolve into a popularity contest. We certainly have the know-how and technology to make such a change -- civilian industry has been using "360" evaluations for years. Change could even be made incrementally -- perhaps making subordinate and peer input only available to the rated officer on a trial basis before providing the information to either the officer's rater/senior rater or to promotion boards.

If, after a trial test period, the Army collectively decides that the use of peer/subordinate input on boards is too threatening to the equilibrium of the senior-subordinate relationship, a "360" type assessment could still be used as a valuable leader development tool for commanders. A less threatening command climate survey that would go to an officer's rater might be another option to explore to inject some indication of leader competency into the evaluation process.

Whatever the mechanism, the message sent by making such changes would be powerful and unmistakable. The officer corps would be pushed to conduct a needed cultural rebalancing of the relative priorities of self, superior, subordinate, and unit.[64] Senior officers would likely be more concerned with the long-term health of their organizations relative to accomplishing short-term goals that may not contribute to sustained organizational success. Our young Generation X officers would also take heart from the fact that the Army was making a significant effort to improve what they perceive to be a stifling leadership climate.

If senior leaders begin to focus more on the welfare of their own organizations, a whole host of desirable behaviors would result. Leaders would be more conscious of their relationships with their subordinates, and they would be more likely to lead by example. Commanders would also be more likely to empower their subordinates, and micromanagers might figure out how to delegate responsibility in order to maximize productivity and allow their subordinates to learn. "Can do" attitudes would be replaced with a more reasoned approach to task accomplishment that would more adequately balance the welfare of the troops against the needs of the mission.

Some limited use of the officer evaluation "stick" to redirect senior officer focus downward would also set the conditions for other leadership successes. Unlike in the current environment, commanders would indeed be rewarded for conducting effective mentoring and counseling. As General Reimer once observed, establishment of a coaching atmosphere within an organization is the best way to stamp out the zero-defects mentality – invigorating true mentorship in the Army would do much to reestablish the climate of special trust and confidence that seems to be missing in many units today.[65]

The officer corps clearly seems to recognize that as a collective group, it currently does a poor job of counseling. Regardless of whether or not changes are made to the evaluation process to encourage more counseling, commanders need to be better educated about how to properly do it. The author received two days of counseling training 15 years ago when reporting in to PERSCOM to be an assignment officer. That small investment in training has paid huge dividends over the years in numerous ways – I learned when to listen, when to coach, and how to tactfully offer suggestions and constructive criticism. I often look back on that short training experience as one of the more significant of my career – it clearly made me a better officer.

This may be the right time to start giving Army officers formal counseling training. If not in Army Service Schools, then surely during Pre-Command Course (PCC) training for battalion and brigade commanders. One of the reasons that senior officers may not be doing counseling is that they don't really know how to properly do it – people are generally more likely to accomplish tasks that they are good at. A commander who is confident in his counseling skills will probably provide better formal and informal mentoring to his subordinates. Since we know our young Generation X officers crave feedback, we should probably take the time to make sure we know how to properly give it to them.

Perhaps we should also invest in a small amount of time at PCC to make senior commanders aware of the impact of automation on the workplace. Leaders should be taught to question their use of e-mail to pass information or tasks down to subordinates. If leaders learn to place themselves in their subordinates shoes and ask themselves: "Is this the proper forum for delivering this task, question, or bit of information?," then perhaps subordinates would be less frustrated with "leadership by e-mail" and automation would be viewed more a tool than as a divisive and expedient means of micromanaging and tasking members of the organization.

Finally, the Army should build upon the findings in the Wong study that our young officers still prize camaraderie and the unique sense of community that one finds in Army life. Our zero-defects culture helped demolish a key part of the socialization process of our young officers when it destroyed the Friday afternoon happy hour and other informal social activities. Our pride in alcohol aversion is associated with the zero-defects mentality – senior leaders are nervous about allowing alcohol at functions because they are afraid that an alcohol-related incident might occur which would reflect poorly on them.

Senior leaders seem to have forgotten how much was accomplished on those Friday afternoons at the Club. There was lots of mentoring and a tremendous amount of camaraderie developed.

> Here you could get with your peers and bosses and get encouragement. You learned how others tackled problems you were facing. It was always one on one (or two) and not in a big classroom with slides and charts. Here we learned that the Army was more than a job, it was a way of life and a profession that was more like a family than a corporation.[66]

There are commanders out there that are still willing to take the risk necessary to create this feeling of camaraderie – but they are too few and far between. Our young Xer officers would surely crave this type of interaction with their peers and bosses, but we need to provide commanders "top cover" if we really expect it to happen. We need to make the changes necessary to lead Army culture out of the zero-defects mentality.

ITS ALL ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND TRUST

In an address to the West Point class of 2000 shortly before their graduation, retired Colonel Don M. Snider talked to the cadets about the importance of obtaining the trust of their subordinates. Snider noted that it took competence, humbleness, and the right attitude as a leader to win this trust. He illustrated this idea with a personal anecdote:

> As a lieutenant, I was selected to be an aide to our new brigade commander, a new brigadier general just arriving on Okinawa. At one of our first meetings, I asked him what my duties were. Mind you, he was a WWII and Korean War veteran with six Silver Stars and five Purple Hearts; he had fought from Omaha Beach to the Ruhr and for two years in Korea. His answer was profound: "First, let me tell you what my duty is. It is always to conduct myself so that every officer in this brigade wants to be like me and, ultimately, to be in my position. And your responsibility, lieutenant, is to tell me whenever any lieutenant or captain sees that I am not doing that."[67]

As Snider pointed out to the cadets, this officer clearly knew what it took to earn the trust of his subordinates. If the Army is serious about stemming the tide of disenchanted young officers who are leaving the Service, then it should do everything within its institutional power to encourage its senior leaders to become more like the remarkable officer cited above. Remember that Generation X officers are not bound to the organization by the promise of lifelong security – their loyalty is more dependent upon the bond of trust between themselves and the institution. Poor command climates and the zero-defects mentality erode that trust and are contributing to the exodus of our preciously small pool of future leaders.

While most commanders in the Army today are superb leaders in every sense, they operate in a risk-averse culture that prohibits them from truly "being all they can be." At the same time, we all know that there are some self-serving commanders out there who have no business leading soldiers – yet they continue to move up through the system. The recommendations in this paper will help to fix both of those problems – helping good commanders become even better, and through changes to the evaluation system, weed out or change the behavior of poor leaders.

At the same time, adoption of these recommendations would give our young officers hope. Fixing the problem with the senior rater portion of the current OER would eliminate a serious source of cynicism and “keep hope alive” for those officers receiving “center of mass” OERs. Developing some method of incorporating peer/subordinate input in the evaluation process would demonstrate to junior officers that the Army is committed to developing commanders who can not only accomplish tasks but who are also competent leaders. Other recommendations concerning such things as counseling training for senior leaders would address a serious problems such as feedback that are important to young Xer officers.

In the final analysis, these recommendations are all about leadership and trust. Like Snider’s boss in the story above, the Army must begin to institutionally “walk the walk” if it is to retain the trust of its young officers and prevent the onrushing “train wreck” of junior officer attrition. As the Army moves into the 21st century, it is struggling to transform itself into a more agile and strategically relevant force. Perhaps it should also take the necessary steps to transform its officer culture into one that will facilitate the development of the innovative and risk-taking leaders that we will need to lead the transformed Army of the future.

WORD COUNT = 7379

ENDNOTES

[1] Thomas E. Ricks, "Younger Officers Quit Army at Fast Clip; Study Finds Little Trust in Senior Leadership," The Washington Post, 17 April 2000, p. A1.

[2] BG Anders B. Aadland <aadlanda@hoffman.army.mil>, "Reply to CGSC Sensing Session," electronic mail message to LTC Thomas W. Weafer <weafert@hoffman.army.mil>, 12 May 2000.

[3] Thomas W. Weafer, "Your Field Artillery Branch...The Cutting Edge," briefing slides, Alexandria, VA, U.S. Army Personnel Command, January 2000.

[4] Statistical information in this paragraph from U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Career Intent, Report # 2000-03, (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, October 1999), 1.

[5] LTG Timothy J. Maude, "Commander's Conference," briefing slides, The Pentagon, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, 19 October 2000.

[6] "Where Have All The Captains Gone?," briefing slides, West Point, NY, Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, 2000.

[7] "Commanders Conference" briefing slides.

[8] David McCormick, The Downsized Warrior (New York: University Press, 1998), 125, 127.

[9] Ibid, 137.

[10] "Chief of Staff of the Army's Leadership Survey," undated; available from <www.d-n-i.net/fcs_folder/leadership_comments.htm>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2000.

[11] A good summary of the issues in this paragraph is found in The Downsized Warrior, 134.

[12] Ideas in this paragraph about the causes of careerism from ibid, 138-139.

[13] Walter F. Ulmer, Joseph J. Collins, and T.O. Jacobs, American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, (Washington, D.C.: The CSIS Press, 2000), 34.

[14] General Dennis J. Reimer, "Leadership for the 21st Century: Empowerment, Environment and the Golden Rule," Military Review (January-February 1996): 5.

[15] Ibid.

[16] The Downsized Warrior, 136.

[17] "Chief of Staff of the Army's Leadership Survey."

[18] U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Leader Development: The Officer Perspective, (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, November 1999), 1-2.

[19] Gordon R. Sullivan, "Gordon R. Sullivan: The Collected Works 1991-1995;" available from <http://call.army.mil/csa/sullivan.htm>;Internet; accessed 24 October 2000.

[20] Department of the Army, Army Leadership, Field Manual 22-100 (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 31 August 1999) 1-19.

[21] Leader Development: The Officer Perspective, 2.

[22] Sullivan, 10.

[23] "Chief of Staff of the Army Leadership Survey."

[24] Leader Development: An Officer Perspective, 2.

[25] This discussion taken from American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, xxii.

[26] Leader Development: The Officer Perspective, 2.

[27] American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, 34.

[28] Ibid, 35.

[29] General John Keane, untitled message concerning high attrition rates for captains in the U.S. Army, Washington D.C., 15 February 2000, 1.

[30] Michael D. Matthews and John R. Hyatt, Factors Affecting the Career Decisions of Army Captains (Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, March 2000), 5.

[31] "Army Training and Leader Development Survey, "What Officer's are Saying About Life in the Army," June 2000; available from http://www.geocities.com/armyreadiness.html>; Internet; accessed 6 October 2000.

[32] Ideas for this paragraph from CSIS, 23, and Leadership Survey, 5.

[33] The idea about the OER sustaining the zero-defect mentality from Leader Development: The Officer Perspective, 2.

[34] The ideas about workaholism and the "greed ethos" from Bruce Tulgan, Managing Generation X -- How to Bring Out the Best in Young Talent (Santa Monica, CA: Merritt Publishing, 1995), 23-24.

[35] Leonard Wong, Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000) 7.

[36] Ibid, 7.

[37] The span of birthyears that denote Generation X vary in the literature anywhere from 1960 to 1983. The 1963-1981definition is from, Managing Generation X, 17.

[38] Leonard Wong, "Where Have All the Captains Gone? -- Junior Officer Attrition in the U.S. Army," briefing slides, Carlisle Barracks, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2001.

[39] Managing Generation X, 19-20.

[40] Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans, Love 'em or Lose 'em -- Getting Good People to Stay (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 1999), 197.

[41] Leonard Wong, Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps, (Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, October 2000), 11-16.

[42] Ibid, 17.

[43] Love 'em or Lose 'em -- Getting Good People to Stay, 200,203.

[44] Ibid, 199.

[45] Managing Generation X, 98-99.

[46] Ideas in this paragraph from Love 'em or Lose 'em -- Getting Good People to Stay, 202, and Managing Generation X, 97-99 and 101-104.

[47] Managing Generation X, 72, 15-16.

[48] Ibid, 15.

[49] Ibid, 74.

[50] Chief of Staff of the Army Leadership Survey.

[51] Leader Development: The Officer Perspective, 2.

[52] Ibid.

[53] American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, 70.

[54] Attributed to Christopher Bassford in The Downsized Warrior, 145.

[55] General Eric Shinseki, “CSA Sends – OER,” message from Department of the Army: Washington, D.C., 20 November 2000, 2.

[56] Ibid, 2-3.

[57] American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, 70-71.

[58] “CSA Sends – OER,” 3.

[59] Ideas in this paragraph paraphrased or taken from an excellent summary of why poor leadership is causing retention problems in Chief of Staff of the Army Leadership Survey.

[60] General Edward C. Meyer, E.C. Meyer, General, United States Army Chief of Staff, 1979-1983, available from <http://call.army.mil/csa/meyer.htm>;Internet; accessed 24 October 2000.

[61] American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century, 79.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Major General Walter F. Ulmer, "Notes on Leadership for the 1980's," Military Review, January-February 1997, 77.

[65] Ulmer, 77, and Reimer, 8.

[66] This quotation and ideas on this topic from “Reply to CGSC Sensing Session,” 3.

[67] Don M. Snider, “100th Night Banquet for the Class of 2000,” Assembly, July-August 2000, 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aadland, BG Anders B. <aadlanda@hoffman.army.mil>. "Reply to CGSC Sensing Session." Electronic mail message to LTC Thomas W. Weafer <weafert@hoffman.army.mil>. 12 May 2000.

Army Training and Leader Development Survey. "What Officer's are Saying About Life in the Army." June 2000. Available from http://www.geocities.com/armyreadiness.html>. Internet. Accessed 6 October 2000.

Chief of Staff of the Army's Leadership Survey." Undated. Available from <www.d-n-i.net/fcs_folder/leadership_comments.htm>. Internet. Accessed 17 October 2000.

Kaye, Beverly, and Sharon Jordan-Evans. Love 'em or Lose 'em -- Getting Good People to Stay. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 1999.

Keane, General John. Untitled Department of the Army message concerning high attrition rates for captains in the U.S. Army. Washington D.C., 15 February 2000.

Matthews, Lloyd J. "The Overcontrolling Leader." Army, April 1996, 31-36.

Matthews, Michael D., and John R. Hyatt. Factors Affecting the Career Decisions of Army Captains. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, March 2000.

Maude LTG Timothy J. "Commander's Conference." Briefing slides. The Pentagon, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, 19 October 2000.

McCormick, David. The Downsized Warrior. New York: University Press, 1998.

Meyer, General Edward C. E.C. Meyer, General, United States Army Chief of Staff, 1979-1983. Available from <http://call.army.mil/csa/meyer.htm>.Internet. Accessed 24 October 2000.

Reimer, General Dennis J. "Leadership for the 21st Century: Empowerment, Environment and the Golden Rule." Military Review (January-February 1996): 5-9.

Ricks, Thomas E. "Younger Officers Quit Army at Fast Clip; Study Finds Little Trust in Senior Leadership" The Washington Post. 17 April 2000, p. A1.

Shinseki, General Eric. "CSA Sends – OER." Message from Department of the Army. Washington, D.C., 20 November 2000.

Snider, Don M. "100th Night Banquet for the Class of 2000." Assembly (July-August 2000): 8-9.

Sullivan Gordon R. "Gordon R. Sullivan: The Collected Works 1991-1995. Available from <http://call.army.mil/csa/sullivan.htm>. Internet. Accessed 24 October 2000.

Tulgan Bruce. Managing Generation X – How to Bring Out the Best in Young Talent. Santa Monica, CA: Merritt Publishing, 1995.

U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. Career Intent. Report # 2000-03. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, October 1999.

U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences. Leader Development: The Officer Perspective. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute, November 1999.

U.S. Department of the Army. Army Leadership. Field Manual 22-100. Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 31 August 1999.

Ulmer, Major General Walter F. "Notes on Leadership for the 1980's." Military Review (January-February 1997): 76-77.

Ulmer, Walter F. , Joseph J. Collins, and T.O. Jacobs. American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century. Washington, D.C.: The CSIS Press, 2000.

Weafer, Thomas W. "Your Field Artillery Branch...The Cutting Edge." Briefing slides. Alexandria, VA, U.S. Army Personnel Command, January 2000.

Where Have All The Captains Gone?" Briefing slides. West Point, NY, Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis, 2000.

Wong, Leonard. "Where Have All the Captains Gone? -- Junior Officer Attrition in the U.S. Army." Briefing slides. Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2001.

Wong, Leonard. Generations Apart: Xers and Boomers in the Officer Corps. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2000.